TRANSCRIPT—VIOLA JONES SPELLS

Interviewee: Viola Jones Spells

Interviewer: David Hurand, WCQS (Radio station : Asheville, N.C.)

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Abstract: Viola was a student at the Allen High School and was a member of the Asheville Student Committee on Racial Equality (ASCORE). As high school students they worked to desegregate various organizations and businesses in Asheville. Viola talks about her experience growing up, using the Market Street Branch, not being able to use the Pack Memorial Library, and how she worked through ASCORE to be a part of its desegregation.

David Hurand: Tell me about the Market Street Branch Library, the quote unquote Colored Public Library.

Viola Jones Spells: The Colored Library was on Market Street and Mrs. Hendricks was the librarian there. It was a very small library and we could only check out two books because the collection was so small.

DH: Based on something you told me just a moment ago, from a very young age you have loved libraries. What is it about libraries that you appreciate so much?

VJS: I love the books and what really made me excited about libraries was when I was very small, they had a special story hour that was given at the YMI where the Colored Library used to be, on Eagle Street. They had a story teller come whose name was Claire Hutchit Bishop and she told the story, 'The Five Chinese Brothers' which she was the author of, and it was so magical. From then on I was in love with stories and books.

DH: As a young girl, did you think, 'I'm going to make a career out of working or being in a library.'? When did it dawn on you that you wanted to continue what sounds like a love affair with books and libraries?

VJS: I always loved books and I went to the Colored Library around fourth, fifth, sixth grade on my own on Saturdays. And I would spend hours there looking at the books. I think I read about every book that was in the colored collection in the children's room. And I've been connected with libraries ever since. When I was at Allen High I was in the Library Club, where you checked out books and shelved books in the library. I also worked on the Library Committee on ASCORE. Then I worked in libraries in college, and during the summer I was a school aide for the Head Start program and I would learn stories and teach it to kids and they loved it. And I thought, 'Well, you know, maybe I should be a librarian.' At that time the only career that was open to Black women was primarily a teacher and I remember having this argument with my father. He was telling me that I was going to be a teacher and I guess that teenage thing, like 'I'm not going to be what you want me to be.' I argued that I wanted to be a librarian, that's what I wanted to be, and that's when I started working toward being a children's librarian.

DH: What inspired you and some of your classmates, whether they were at Stephens-Lee or at Allen, what inspired you to become and activist and actually work to desegregate Pack Library?

VJS: Well I was always interested in libraries and after we had desegregated the lunch counters and we had done the picket lines at the grocery stores, Mr. Roland, who was our mentor for the ASCORE committee, said that we should now think about other public services that had segregated services, like the colleges and parks and recreation and the library. So because I was so interested in libraries, I wanted to serve on the library committee, and so we all decided ourselves and assigned ourselves to the various committees and we focused on whatever committee that we were working on. Since mine was the library, we did the research and found out why we couldn't use the Pack Square, because Mr. Sondley had written in his will saying that Black people couldn't use the library because he was giving private monies to the library.

DH: It's been fifty years since Pack Library was desegregated, since you succeeded. Is it shocking to you that it's been fifty years?

VJS: Yes, it doesn't seem that long. The years went by fairly quickly.

DH: Do you remember the first time you went into Pack Library?

VJS: Yes, the first time I went in Pack Library was when we had the meeting with Anthony Lord who was the library director, and myself and the person who at that time was the president of ASCORE were the only two people who went to that meeting to request that Black people be able use that library and all of its resources.

DH: What's it like for you today to stand at the Vance Monument and look at what is now home to the Asheville Art Museum and think back to those days?

VJS: We just had a program last Sunday, the Sunday before last, and we went up there for a reception and it just looks so different. It doesn't even look the way the library looked then. You just wouldn't even think about the library at that time because it's been renovated and changed around. It's just amazing to think how Asheville has really changed, the library is really changed, everything has really changed about the library. I mean, even the library today feels nothing like the library did in those days. It was a cold and unwelcoming place back then.

DH: So the first time you were actually in the library was to attend the meeting where they were discussing whether or not they would allow you to use the library.

VJS: Yes, well first we made the request and Anthony Lord said he had no problem with us using the library but that he would have present it to the library board.

DH: So the Board of Trustees of the City of Asheville Library met in September and at that time Architect Tony Lord was the chair of that board. And ASCORE had made this request to open up the library. How was that received during that meeting?

VJS: Mr. Lord was very civil. He was very kind. That's what struck me about that meeting with him, was that he was so civil and so very nice, as opposed to the people when we'd picket the lunch counters or picket the grocery stores where the people were very mean and said a lot of ugly words and spat at us and everything. He was very nice. And even the second meeting, after they had approved us to come into the library, we met

again with Mr. Lord and he gave us a tour of the library. He even went into the vault and brought out these very special books. I remember when I gave my speech, I remembered it as being the first Bible, but it wasn't that, it was a Bible—my memory's starting to open up now that I did the speech—it was a special Bible that didn't have anything to do with the Bible I had talked about in my speech. He said how many valuable books that the library did own and that we were welcome to look at these valuable books at any time.

DH: How nervous were you when you made that speech?

VJS: I was pretty nervous during that time but I was very excited to be able to talk about my experiences with the Colored Library and the first times we met with Anthony Lord and how I really wanted to be at that meeting because libraries meant so much to me. I wasn't scheduled to be at that meeting. The person who was the chairman of our library committee was Wilhelmina Turmin, and she was the one who was going to go to the meeting and she was going to select a second person. But it just so happened that they couldn't go, so I went and Barbara Turmin went. She was the president of ASCORE at that time.

DH: There was an obstacle. And that obstacle you made reference to just a moment ago, was the Sondley Reference Library. Explain why the Sondley Reference Library was an obstacle to desegregate Pack Library.

VJS: Because Mr. Sondley had left in his will a large sum of monies to the library and stipulated in his will that Black people could not use the library if the Pack Library was to

receive these monies. Because the library also received tax monies and since Black people paid taxes, we were also eligible to use the library and its resources.

DH: When you went into that meeting, did you have any doubt that the library board would say, 'Yes, you're right. We will desegregate this library.'

VJS: No, because I thought afterwards everything went very smoothly, because everything else that we had tried to desegregate, we ran against a lot of obstacles, a lot of angry words. The negative feelings in the community was very high. Things were very tense in the city at that time.

DH: It wasn't a unanimous decision, to desegregate the library?

VJS: No, it was four against one.

DH: Looking back, is that amazing to you?

VJS: It was amazing that there was four against one. I envisioned it was going to be more and that we were going to put up a huge fight. Because even after the lunch counters were desegregated, and we would go in and we had agreed that we would still use the lunch counters, we still would go there and have to wait hours and not be served. We used to have students who would come in after we'd been there maybe an hour or two hours, other students would come in to relieve us and they still wouldn't be served.

DH: Considering that history, when you right get down to it, it's pretty gutsy what you did. So what really inspired this group of ASCORE students to see this through—the lunch counters, the parks, the library?

VJS: I think it was because of James Ferguson who was the first president of ASCORE. He and a core group of students--Marvin Chambers, Jane Burton, Charles Bates, and some other students got together—they were senior students at Stephens-Lee. And they saw how Stephens-Lee wasn't getting its fair share of books and opportunities to study at Stephens-Lee and they approached the school board about it. With his leadership, he galvanized the students together and we began to work on desegregating Asheville. And we were the only high school during the whole civil rights program that helped to desegregate their city. Most other cities were desegregated by college students. And since we had no college students in Asheville it was left up to us as high school students. So I think we were very fortunate to have the leadership of James Ferguson.

DH: James Ferguson today is an attorney in Charlotte, I understand.

VJS: Right He's made a career of doing civil rights cases.

DH: And you have made a career of working in libraries.

VJS: Yes, I think most of all I was stimulated by hearing the 'The Five Chinese Brothers' which made me interested in books and stories and having attended the libraries so much, looking at books and the fact that I always wanted to go to the Pack Square Children's Room and I never could. It really made me sad. I really had a strong desire to do that but by the time I was able to use the Pack Square Children's Room, I was too old to use that room. And I think that helped to make me want to become a Children's Librarian, so that I could make libraries fun and interesting for other children who were coming along.

DH: And you have worked in some of the great libraries in this country.

VJS: Yes, I worked in the New York Public library, and the Free Library of Philadelphia. Started out as a children's librarian and advanced to become a regional librarian in a large urban setting.

DH: So what do you think it meant to the Black community of Asheville to see the library desegregated? Beyond what this meant to you personally.

VJS: Oh, I think it meant a lot because even though once I finished high school and went on to college in Durham, the students who were left in high school and the colleges were open by that time to Black students, some of them went on to UNCA, AB Tech, and they had the advantage of using the resources of the Pack Square Library.

DH: You told me that the first time you went into the library, into Pack Library, was for the meeting to discuss having free access to the library. Do you remember the first time you went to the Library after the order came down to desegregate the library and you were there for the pleasure of using the library?

VJS: It was right after they gave the word that I went in because as a member of the library committee, it was still up to us to use the Pack Library. So every day after I left Allen I would go down to the Pack Library and look for books to check out. Or sometimes just to go into the newspaper room and read the newspapers. I really wasn't interested in reading the newspapers at that time, but I wanted to do something different and to make it known that we could now use the services, and so people could be getting used to seeing us in there. And, really the hard work was not in desegregating the library, it was getting the community to now use the library because they weren't used to using

the library. We had to make the announcement known. I went to Mt. Zion, so it was my job to get messages to the community about what we were doing in ASCORE. We announced it in churches, and to try to get people to go to the library and sign up for library cards, and to use the library.

DH: Did it take time to convince the community it's okay to use the library?

VJS: Yes, they weren't used to using the library. And I really don't think that the Colored Library had a lot of users either. Not really.

DH: It's an amazing period to live through, when you think back.

VJS: A lot of changes. I think Asheville's done a three hundred sixty degree turn. I'm an artist now and I have a studio down in the River Arts District and I've had some people come in who have come back to visit Asheville. I had one lady come in, she was Jewish, and she talked about how racist the community was at that time, and she attended Lee Edwards and she told how the kids picked on her and we talked about how Asheville had changed. It has made a three hundred and sixty degree turnaround since I was in high school, Asheville has made many changes. It was just different.

DH: Different for the better?

VJS: Different for the better.

END OF INTERVIEW.